

## Orientalism in Language Education

Hamza Cherifi, Souâd Hamerlain

Department of English, University of Mostaganem, Algeria

[cherifi-hamza@hotmail.fr](mailto:cherifi-hamza@hotmail.fr), [hsouad04@yahoo.fr](mailto:hsouad04@yahoo.fr)

### Abstract:

The present paper demonstrates how differences among languages embody the impetus for voicing representations, obviously idealizing the “English logic” on the one hand and de-centering Arabic rhetoric on the other. In this token lies a different form of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, one that features most in the active devise of rigidly polarizing dichotomies which bear significance beyond the mere description of language diversity and relativity. This practice follows from apparently well exploited probabilities: First, that language typifies thought patterns and second, as corollary of the first, that manners in which sentences are stuck together mark the logic signs of discourse communities. It follows that the evident bias in the teaching of intercultural competence reasserts the pervasiveness of ideology in the language education enterprise.

Keywords: Arabic; rhetoric; Orientalism; parallelism; persuasion

### INTRODUCTION

In the course of conducting my research for the master’s degree in Applied Linguistics, I (Hamza Cherifi) dragged behind the oversensitivity to learners’ interference errors. The prestige value assumed of the polarizing dichotomies on compositions across cultures pushed an uncritical selection of content for the design of a treatment expected to minimize my participants’ textual transfer from Arabic, namely parallelism and long sentences. At that time, I was unaware of the danger lurking beneath dichotomies such as “direct/indirect”, “logic/illogic”, “linear/non-linear”, and “clear/ambiguous”. And to add to my sorrows, I was not only somewhat Orientalist but it is that I was an ‘Orientalistrator’ as I made the respondents—and to some degree the then-exotic panel members—place faith in stereotyping, colonialist binaries disguised in pedagogical attraction. When using an interview as a way to crosscheck the uptake of the treatment, results seemed just to follow the participants’ desire to meet certain expectations. Thereafter, a bird’s eye view reveals the severe shortcomings of my

study and, at the same time, stimulated the attempt to advance that Orientalism could well thrive through linguistics, one that falls within the scope of Edward Said’s definition:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident. Thus a very huge mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between the East and the West as the starting point for elaborate theories...concerning “the Orient”, its people, mind, destiny, and so on [1].

Westerners’ discourse on the Orient seems, as well, to encompass Westernized idealizations on Arabic being the dominant language of Oriental areas. Similarly these idealizations typify domination as well as varying degrees of hegemony as evident in subjective, ethnocentric treaties on the Arabic rhetoric digested by Western academics.

## 1. THE LEGACY OF ROBERT KAPLAN

The anatomy for contrasts and dichotomies in the nature of paragraph development has been Robert Kaplan [2] centralizing the “well-formedness” of EFL learners’ composition. Here, a major attribution to deviant L2 writing, Kaplan argues, lies in *interference* [3] or, more consensually, *language transfer* [4]: “The universality of textual and discorsal patterns had been too readily been assumed, just as mechanisms of cohesion and coherence were thought to be universal enough to need no attention from writing teachers” [2].

As a way to give substance to upcoming statements, [2] reports findings of a study where the English writing of students with diverse L1 background are analyzed. In the Arabic

language group, paragraph progression is held as featured by complex series of parallel constructions, in addition to the tendency to enclose unnecessary details which “strike the modern English reader as archaic and awkward” and, more startling, which “stand in the way of clear communication” [2]. Oriental discourse is described as built by general statements about the topic joint to sentences “shooting off” in different, unrelated directions. The subject in the latter discourse is said to be turned around and tackled from different aspects. Kaplan remarks that Russian discourse exhibits short sentences interrupted by long ones which bear propositions irrelevant to the continuity of the central theme. To stress and propagate these claims, Kaplan provides graphical representations for sequences of paragraph development (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Graphical representations of paragraph developments (Kaplan, 1966, p. 21).

As for English rhetoric, Kaplan placed an appropriationist claim: “The expected sequence of thought in English is essentially Platonic-Aristotelean”, which “represents the common inductive and deductive reasoning which the English reader expects to be an integral part of any formal communication” [2]. Kaplan contends that languages or cultures have diverse sequences of paragraph development. The central piece allowing Kaplan’s assertions to transcend undeniable differences into proclaimed differences in thought lies in the connection advocated between patterns of thought and paragraph construal which he depicts as the embodiment of reasoning. Such a

stance, in fact, typifies allegiance to linguistic relativism: “It is necessary to recognize that a paragraph is an artificial thought unit used in written language to suggest a cohesion which commonly may not exist in oral languages” [2].

## 2. CRITICAL REACTIONS

A main, undeniable attraction of contrastive rhetoric has been catering for issues pertaining to the achievement of certain pedagogical wants. CR certainly enjoys the novelty of calling for attention to the compositional accuracy of non-native speakers. This follows that requirements of composition are distinct from the demands of grammatical competence and from those of L1

composition: “A fallacy in some refutes and some durations”, Kaplan reports, “is one which assumes that because the student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate essay in a second language” [2]. Accordingly, Kaplan reasserts this idea by claiming that “the model...was intended not as a grand theoretical pronouncement, but merely as an aid to teachers in moving... to reading/writing” [2]. As such, Kaplan’s account raises into prominence the fact that analysis goes beyond the confines of a sentence; that transferability touches on discourse level in the same way as it does on the linguistic sub-linguistic system remainder; and that rhetorical structuring is a goal in language teaching. The same agenda, nevertheless, does host pronouncements that not only deny contrastive rhetoric pedagogical fitness but leave the ‘approach’ to be marked as ideologically saturated.

Overriding of all, the very notion of contrastive rhetoric appears theoretically suspect, echoing strong sensitivity, not to learners ‘improper’ performance, but, seemingly, to one among many possible revenues of inadequate output: A learner’s mother tongue. Contrastive rhetoric seems to carve out a deterministic view of L2 writers inevitably transferring from their L1. The rhetorical preferences exhibited by L2 learners while composing in a foreign language may not necessarily be the result of direct transfer of rhetorical patterns from the native language “but can be due to other cultural dimensions such as L1 literacy practices, writing functions, writing conventions, the frequency and distribution of different writing genres” [6].

Comparing the rhetorical sequences of American and Korean students, [7] concludes that “they [Korean students] put several facts first which are not closely related to the main idea of the discourse”. The statement gets backed up with

supporting paragraphs all turning around the central idea. [7] adds that, like Koreans, Americans may present the main thesis summary at the end of an essay and put a number of facts, but these are ones which do relate to the main idea. In this respect, [7] concludes that Kaplan’s portrayal of Korean style as “showing the topic from variety of tangential views” “seems to be true to some degree”. [8] explains: “In the West, composition instruction often tends to approach a topic from a balanced perspective, by encouraging the student to give appropriate information to support the topic from two or more points of view, to lend these views credibility and to come to a balanced conclusion or judgment”. The fact, however, remains that this shooting-off sequence unsurprisingly matches the interpretive modality of recipients with a culture that synchronizes rhetorical preferences. As such, “no matter how loosely paragraphs or sentences are connected”, Korean readers do get into grips with that as “they try to connect each paragraph or sentence to the main idea which is stated at the beginning” [9].

Attempts to devise an English-based template of linguistic neutrality used the argument that English “has a sufficient measure of stability to be perceived by millions of people in all countries as extremely important” [10] to alleviate underdevelopment: “Most of them [immigrants] feel it is English that they need to study if they are not to remain socially disadvantageous for the rest of their lives” [10]. Actually, if we were to advance a neutrality of language, and if this one is no more than communicatively saturated, then the ELF (English as a lingua franca) construct seems quite relevant given that ‘English’ gets stripped of historicity and cultural components. Yet, proponents of further centralization have paradoxically challenged the assumption behind communicative neutrality with non-English culture, advancing the need for cultural scripts to conjoin this form of ‘neutrality’:

The idea advanced...that international English can take the form of a culturally neutral nuclear English divorced from the historically shaped and culture-bound Anglo English is, in my view, totally unrealistic. To see this, it is enough to consult international trade agreements such as those concluded between the AESAN countries of South East Asia and the People's Republic of China (Agreement 2002) where an exceedingly Anglo English is used to ensure full reciprocal comprehensibility with legally binding consequences on both sides [11].

In the same vein, [12] argues that “the neglect of cultural factors in the teaching of English in China was responsible for the poor performance of Chinese students in their interaction or contact with foreigners”. This detachment, [13] comments, “runs counter to the Chinese desire...of being globalized” since “in China there is a strong tendency to go against the trend of nativization by reinstating the cultural component in English language teaching”. Objections to recent trends of domesticating English, which led to a seemingly annoying decrease of cultural scripts in language teaching, have been triggering campaigns to regain the centrality of English culture. While the rationale for the culture-language connection is undeniably sound, this one does not constitute the sole impetus for advocating the centralization of English culture. The deeply rooted conviction, which seems resistant to change in the minds of Westerners, appears to regulate subjective assumption disguised in pedagogic and linguistic accounts.

### 3. ON ARABIC RHETORIC

Of all the languages subverted by the English-specific descriptors, the case with Arabic seems to transgress the description of a language in the eyes of another. Here, English operates following a rather different agenda: Not as a mould for ironing out, and devising a Westernized prototype for communication but as a platform for denying Arabic communicative signification, identifying it with “non-logic”, “indirectness”,

“ambiguity”, and “irrelevance”. The following quote illustrates Koch's (1983) understanding of Arabic rhetoric in a work that Westerners and Arab scholars unthinkably regard as reliably foundational:

But before I was able to continue, my caller began again. Once again he told me who had given him my name. Before the conversation ended with me giving him the references and agreeing to send him the things he wanted, he has rephrased his story several more time, and I was only with difficulty keeping myself from laughing—laughing not at him, but because of the wonderfully ironic nature of the whole interaction. His request for information about how Arabs convince people was a perfect example of how Arabs convince people: Namely by repeating. Metalinguistic remarks like *listen you are doing it yourself* have a way of bringing the conversation to an abrupt end in embarrassed self-consciousness. So I said nothing about my observation. But if I had thought of it at that time, I would have liked to remind my Arab caller of an Arabic proverb one of my informants told me. The proverb goes: *kathratu tikrar tofidd elhimar*, and what it means is enough repetition convinces even a donkey [14].

At the same time, Koch (1983) disdains the banal presumption that oral traditions typify illiteracy, for orality should not imply that the writing is not unplanned. As [15] declares, “it is hard to imagine anyone producing the sort of balanced complexity or elaborate parallelism we have seen without careful planning”. One could further comment that different languages allow varying degrees of oral traditions in written discourse, and that indifference between spoken and written discourse is one of the salient features of Arabic. By the same token, while this parallelism is, arguably, a feature of poetic language, Arabic texts are not poetry but share the features of poetic text in other cultures. While the Arabic text “certainly shares some features with text in other cultures which are labeled “poetic”...they are not



poetic in an epic sense. That is, no Arab would call them poetry; they are prose” [14].

Koch alleges that, instead of relying on evidential basis, Arabs deploy the establishment of truth, or *presentation*, to construe an argument. That is, where logical arguments and cautions are expected, Arab writers tend not to argue on controversial matters, assuming the reader not to be critical of the laid out content as it cannot be faulted. Classically, this conviction derives from the religious mysticism thriving in the Quran. On this basis, Koch further contends that Arab learners of English transcend “presentation as proof” to argumentation that seeks to attain truth by means of verification and assessment. This leads to a seemingly striven-for conclusion: The Arab spares efforts to prove what requires convincing arguments.

Drawing a connection between certain language structures and specific political forms, [14] traces presentation as proof to hierarchical societies, where truth is not an individual matter, and where individuals are subverted by a hegemony of collectivism. [14] adds that if truth is individual, and if the individual has the right to search for it, one would have had the liberty to show his/her own truth and to devise proof to convince others. Koch concludes that the centrality of the word is emphasized in Arab mentality, where the elegant expression of an idea is part of its validity.

On Arab communication style, [16] concludes that “emphasis is on form over function, on affect over accuracy, and image over meaning”. This follows from a pervasive, overriding distinction: Arab culture stresses the oral channel for communication which is featured by higher symbolism and intense interpersonal relations between interactants. Indeed, it has been taken that, in the West, the thriving modality of interaction is prominently print, a practice often

traced to a tendency to conserve knowledge for transmission. The latter conditions premium concern with accuracy, marking a low-context culture which, unlike the high-context counterpart, “tends to place more meaning in the language code and little meaning in the code” [16].

Degree of directness makes another criterion American and Arab cultures are set apart along. American manners are held to take an unequivocal style arrived at by avoidance of unneeded details [17] 2000). [18] relates direct structuring to American sayings such as *Don’t beat around the bush*, *Say what you mean*, and *Get to the point*. This style, [14] remarks, “strives to accurately represent fact, techniques or expectations and to avoid emotional overtones and allusion”.

The preference for labeling has apparently been taking contrastive approaches to another level of value distribution. In effect, literature presents American culture as uniquely centralizing achievements and actions, like no other culture, be it Japanese, Chinese or Arab. Western cultures are assigned the overriding descriptor of ‘Doing’ societies portrayed as stressing the importance of visible accomplishment and measurement of achievements. [16] traces the second orientation to expressions like *Actions speak louder than words*, *How are you doing?* And *What is happening?* In opposition to ‘doing’ cultures, rhetoricians and ethnographers set the ‘being’ counterpart, in which one’s social status and rank outstrip achievements in importance. [16] advances that this state is evident in manners of greetings: The Arabic equivalent to American *How are you doing?* Would be *How are your conditions?*

While certain claims on differences are perfectly reasonable, progressist descriptors like “accurate” and “reasonable” echo monologic

treatments which seek to neutralize a Westernized view on Arab rhetoric. Effectively, Arabic conceals the message *only* by the measures of Western readers or other recipients with a different language background. In other words, such saliencies of Arabic rhetoric are safely fitting for a community's communicative and persuasive customs, which ought not to be either shared or mutually intelligible across cultures. Directness and 'linearity' make not neutral "marking criterion", nor are they standard norms for an effectiveness of some sort. Indeed, Arabs—in the words of Arab scholars—treat language and resonance as part of their rhetoric, but not to the limit "that a single anecdote can constitute adequate evidence for a conclusion, and a specific person can embody the beliefs and ideas of an entire community" [16]. Moreover, the sayings and proverbs said to typify manners of communication are mere idealistic phrases in which case acting upon them is not a certainty. Adding to this, these proverbs are not specific to one culture at the expense of another: The conventional response to *How are you doing?* is not *I have achieved something* but, more likely, *I don't feel good today!* which equally tells of personal conditions.

## CONCLUSION

The present grounded interest in linguistics echoes heightened curiosity of what processes underpin, and even manipulate communication, especially in the light of ever-increasing intricacies of social fabrication. The shift to discourse-level analysis gave birth to an impetus for representing Arabic rhetoric as "non-logic" and "ambiguous", presenting an attempt to neutralize a Western view of Arabic. This stance seems intensely present in literature on rhetoric and linguistic anthropology, to the extent that these dichotomies are deeply rooted in the minds of Arab linguists and scholars, who are seemingly led by some sort of exoticism. Such a state, besides typifying an image of Orientalist discourse, calls for higher attentiveness to

linguistic handlings, namely in the light of the status of language in the minds of individuals.

## Acknowledgement

I (Hamza Cherifi) owe the motivation behind this article to my teacher, Bel Abbes Neddar.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books
- [2] Kaplan, R. (1966) Cultural thought patterns in Intercultural education. Reprinted from: *Language learning* 16, 2, 11-25.
- [3] Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across Cultures*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, Michigan University Press.
- [4] Odlin, T. (1989). *Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Kaplan, R. (2000). Contrastive rhetoric and discourse studies: Who writes what to whom? When? In what circumstances. In S. Sarangi & M. Couthard (Eds), *Discourse and social life*, (pp. 88-101). Harlow, UK: Longman.
- [6] Ismail, S. (2010). Arabic and English persuasive writing of Arabs from a contrastive rhetoric perspective (Doctoral dissertation). University of Pennsylvania.
- [7] Kim, K. (1996). A comparison of rhetorical styles in Korean and America students' writing. *Intercultural communication studies*, 3, 3, 113-150
- [8] Wain-chain, C. (2007). Some literature review on the comparison of the Chinese *Qe-Cheng-Zhun-He* writing Model and the Western Problem-solving schema. *The interdisciplinary journal*, 52, 137-148.
- [9] Hinds, J. (1990). Inductive, deductive and quasi-inductive expository writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai. In Ann J. and Ulla. C (Eds), *Coherence in writing: Research and pedagogical perspectives*. (pp. 89-109). Alexandria, Virginia: TESOL, Inc.
- [10] Strauss, C., & Quinni, N. (1997). *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- [11] Wiernzbicka, A. (2006). *English Meaning and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [12] Li, Ming. 2004. The need to integrate language and culture in teaching English as a foreign language in China. In K. Tam & T. Weiss (Eds), *English and Globalization: Perspectives from Hong Kong and Mainland China* (pp. 219- 231). Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- [13] Tam, K., & Weiss, T eds. (2004). *English and Globalization: Perspectives from Hong Kong and Mainland China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- [14] Koch, B. (1983) Presentation as proof: The language of Arabic rhetoric, *Anthropological linguistics*, 25, 47-60.
- [15] Ochs, E. (1979). Planned and unplanned discourse. In Givon T (Ed), *Discourse and syntax* (pp. 51-80).
- [16] Zahrana, R. (1995). Understanding cultural preferences of Arab communication style. *Public elation review* 21, 3, 241-255.
- [17] Mohammed, A., & Omer, M. (2001). Text and culture: Cohesion as a marker of rhetorical organization in Arabic and English narrative texts. *RELC Journal*, 31, 45, 45-75.
- [18] Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational Style*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.